פורום דו-קיום בנגב לשוויון אזרחי
منتدى التعايش السلمي في النقب من أجل المساواة المدنية
Negev Coexistence Forum For Civil Equality

OHCHR Call for inputs on universal birth registration and the use of digital technologies

NCF Report on Universal Birth Registration and the Use of Digital Technologies: Bedouin Women in the Negev-Naqab

The Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality (NCF) is an Arab-Jewish organization established in 1997 to promote a shared society between Jews and Arabs in the Naqab, Israel's southern desert region. The organization acknowledges that the Bedouin community in the area has been neglected by successive Israeli Governments, resulting in the denial of their full rights and recognition of their villages. NCF works to prevent further harm to recognized and unrecognized villages through various activities, including local and international advocacy, research, community activities, public protests, media presence, and social media outreach. All of these activities are based on the Arab-Jewish partnership. NCF invests significant effort in documenting the Negev/Naqab through visual projects. Most of the visual documentation is generated from projects where NCF provides video and still photography equipment to Arab-Bedouin women and children. This enables them to document their everyday lives and human rights violations.

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I.   Executive Summary

This report examines the critical challenges faced by Bedouin women in the Negev/Naqab regarding universal birth registration, a fundamental right enabling access to essential services and legal recognition. While digital technologies offer promising solutions, this report specifically addresses the obstacles to online birth registration and the consequences of being unable to utilize it.

Many Bedouin women, particularly in unrecognized villages, face significant barriers to registration, including geographical isolation, inadequate infrastructure, and discriminatory practices. The lack of reliable internet access, now recognized not only as a tool but as a human right itself, further complicates the use of online platforms. As noted by the UN General Assembly in 2016, internet access is crucial for realizing other human rights, and denying this access to marginalized communities only deepens existing inequalities[1]. Bedouin women without reliable internet are denied a readily accessible alternative to physical registration, perpetuating their exclusion from vital services and legal recognition. Grounded in the Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality's commitment to research and advocacy, this report recommends how digital tools can be effectively implemented to improve birth registration processes for these women. By analyzing existing challenges, highlighting best practices, and offering concrete recommendations, this report aims to contribute to NCF's efforts to secure the fundamental rights of the Bedouin community and foster a more just and equitable society in the Negev/Naqab.

II.   Background

Birth registration, a fundamental human right enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, is essential for accessing basic services and opportunities. However, for the Bedouin community in Israel's Negev/Naqab region, exercising this right presents unique challenges.

The Bedouins in the Negev are an Arab-Palestinian community who have traditionally lived as nomadic pastoralists. After the establishment of Israel in 1948, many Bedouins were displaced, and their traditional way of life was disrupted. Today, a significant portion of the Bedouin population resides in unrecognized villages, which lack basic infrastructure and services. This marginalization leads to challenges in accessing fundamental rights, including, in some circumstances, birth registration.

The lack of birth registration has a cascading effect, hindering access to healthcare, education, and other vital services, ultimately perpetuating a cycle of inequality. This report delves into the complexities of this issue and explores potential solutions to ensure that all Bedouin children in the Negev have their births officially recognized, safeguarding their fundamental rights and future opportunities.

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[1] https://www.article19.org/data/files/Internet_Statement_Adopted.pdf

III.   Challenges to Universal Birth Registration

Despite the existing legal and policy frameworks, achieving universal birth registration within the Bedouin community in the Negev/Naqab faces significant obstacles. These challenges are deeply intertwined with the community's unique socio-economic context and historical disadvantages.

1. **Geographic Barriers:** The geographic isolation of unrecognized Bedouin villages poses a significant and multifaceted barrier to universal birth registration. These communities, often located far from government offices, require inhabitants to undertake arduous journeys to register births, which becomes a formidable undertaking[2].
2. **Distance and Transportation:** The vast distances to the nearest medical or registration facilities, combined with unreliable transportation options, make these journeys not only costly but also time-consuming and often impossible. This difficulty is exacerbated by poorly maintained roads, many of which are unpaved and become impassable during adverse weather conditions[3].
3. **Impact on Healthcare Access:** In most of the Bedouin unrecognized villages there are no medical clinics that provide basic health services. Geographic isolation also critically impacts healthcare access, compelling many women to opt for home births instead of traveling to distant hospitals and clinics. This situation is further complicated by the limited reach of emergency services, which often do not serve these remote areas effectively, forcing residents to undertake long and precarious journeys to access medical care[4].
4. **Socioeconomic Factors:** High poverty rates, low literacy levels[5], especially among women, and significant language barriers impede the Bedouin community's ability to navigate the complex bureaucratic processes required for birth registration. These socioeconomic challenges limit their engagement with governmental processes and reduce their access to essential services.
5. **Technological Barriers:**

   Internet Access: The lack of reliable internet connectivity in Bedouin villages severely restricts the use of digital platforms[6] for birth registration. Despite the growing digital landscape, these areas remain significantly underserved, with many lacking the necessary infrastructure to support stable internet connections[7]. In unrecognized Bedouin villages, the lack of reliable internet access is a critical issue[8], affecting the usability of digital platforms for essential services like birth registration. These areas have virtually no infrastructure to support internet connectivity, placing them entirely outside the growing digital landscape. This complete absence of Internet services prevents residents from engaging in digital processes that are crucial for the efficient and timely registration of births, exacerbating their isolation and hindering their access to fundamental civic rights.

   Digital Literacy: Even where technology is available, limited digital literacy among community members can hinder the effective adoption of online registration methods. This digital divide not only perpetuates exclusion but also reinforces existing vulnerabilities within these populations[9].

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[2] Sikkuy and RCUV, The obstacles to accessible public transportation in dispersed communities in the Negev, at: https://tinyurl.com/y93t2goe
[3] Ibid
[4] Ibid
[5] https://www.dukium.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/NCFs-Human-Rights-Report-International-Day-of-Human-Rights-2022.pdf
[6] GOVERNMENT WEBSITE FOR BIRTH REGISTRATION/ https://www.gov.il/en/service/naming_baby
[7] Internet accessibility solutions for Bedouin students as an integral part of exercising their right to education: https://www.dukium.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Education-and-Internet-position-paper-final.pdf
[8] Internet Association Survey, 2023-2024. https://en.isoc.org.il/about/news-room/2023-2024-israel-internet-index-report-by-isoc-il
[9] Ibid

IV. Logistical and Administrative Barriers

1. **Infrastructure:** The infrastructure in unrecognized Bedouin villages lacks the necessary support for essential services like birth registration. This shortfall is especially critical regarding medical infrastructure, which affects timely birth registrations. Many of these communities do not have close medical facilities[10], leading to frequent home births. However, documenting these home births is challenging without accessible registration services. This lack of infrastructure results in significant delays in obtaining birth certificates, essential for accessing various state services and rights. Consequently, this inadequate infrastructure hinders the community's ability to engage effectively with government processes, deepening their exclusion from wider societal benefits[11].

2. **Governmental and Policy Challenges:** There are significant regulatory and policy barriers that need addressing to facilitate the implementation and standardization of digital birth registration systems. Ensuring clear guidelines, legal frameworks, and robust government commitment is essential for the accessibility, security, and interoperability of these digital solutions.

3. **Legal and Procedural Challenges:** Mandatory DNA testing for establishing paternity where the father's Israeli citizenship is questioned poses a significant hurdle. The challenges in conducting these tests, whether due to non-compliance or logistical issues, often result in children remaining unregistered, thereby denying them basic rights and access to services[12]. A significant barrier to the registration of births among Bedouin children born to mothers without legal status involves the requisite DNA tests to establish paternity. As detailed in the Family Law Israel's explanation, these tests are mandatory to prove the father's Israeli citizenship[13]. However, the actual execution of these tests can be fraught with difficulties, including refusal by the parents to comply or logistical and financial challenges in conducting the tests. This procedural hurdle is exacerbated in the context of unrecognized Bedouin villages, where the lack of legal status for many inhabitants intersects with the complexities of state policies on citizenship and parentage recognition. The absence of a straightforward registration process due to uncompleted DNA tests underscores the necessity for digital solutions that can streamline these procedures and ensure that every child's right to identity and subsequent access to services is safeguarded, irrespective of parental citizenship or compliance with DNA testing.

4. **Safety and Security Concerns:** The ongoing regional conflict significantly exacerbates the challenges Bedouin women face in accessing birth registration services. As our NCF-Nagabiya research highlights, heightened security concerns[14], coupled with the lack of adequate protection and safe spaces in many unrecognized villages, make travel to registration offices risky and discourage women from undertaking this essential bureaucratic process. The constant threat of conflict and the absence of security infrastructure disrupt daily life and create significant barriers to accessing essential services, including birth registration.

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[10] See for example, Adalah, "Health Ministry Reopens Mother & Child Clinic in Unrecognized Village of Wadi al-Nam," 24 Nov 2011: https://tinyurl.com/ya5uc8ma
[11] Physicians for Human Rights Israel, Neglected Villages in the Negev," 2017, https://www.phr.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Ana-Huna.pdf
[12] https://gisha.org/en/thanks-to-our-efforts-more-palestinians-holding-israeli-citizenship-were-evacuated-from-gaza/
[13] https://health.gov.il/English/Services/Citizen_Services/tests/Pages/paternity.aspx/1000
[14] https://www.dukium.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/NCF-Nagabiya-Research-Shelter-Safety-Feeling-of-security.pdf

V. Improvement Measures and Recommendations

Strengthening Digital Infrastructure

Investment in Connectivity: Initiatives to improve internet access, such as satellite internet or community Wi-Fi programs, are vital. This expansion is crucial as Bedouin localities significantly lag in infrastructure development compared to other areas.

Enhancing Digital Skills: Targeted training programs are essential to build digital literacy, allowing effective use of online registration platforms. These should be tailored to meet the literacy levels and language preferences of the Bedouin communities.

Addressing Administrative and Policy Barriers

Streamlining Registration Processes: Simplification of the birth registration process through mobile registration units visiting remote villages, and designated registration days with extended hours, will make registration more accessible.

Community Outreach and Awareness: Implementing community outreach programs to educate families on the importance of birth registration is crucial. Collaboration with local leaders and community organizations will ensure the messaging is culturally sensitive and builds trust.

Culturally Sensitive Design and Language Access: Ensuring that digital platforms and materials are accessible and culturally appropriate is fundamental. Providing language options in both Hebrew and Arabic is necessary to ensure inclusivity.

Contextual Challenges

Despite the existing frameworks, universal birth registration within the Bedouin community in the Negev/Naqab faces significant obstacles due to the unique socio-economic context and historical disadvantages of the community. Addressing these requires tailored governmental interventions.

Conclusion and Call to Action

Universal birth registration is essential for the rights and well-being of Bedouin children in the Negev-Naqab. While challenges persist, there are substantial opportunities to improve access and overcome barriers through digital technologies and government action. By addressing the digital divide, simplifying administrative processes, and enhancing community engagement, we can ensure every Bedouin child's birth is registered, granting them the legal recognition and access to essential services they deserve.

Call to Action: We urge all stakeholders, including government agencies, civil society organizations, and technology providers, to prioritize and commit to enhancing birth registration processes for Bedouin women in the Negev-Naqab. Collaborative efforts and sustainable solutions are crucial to empower the Bedouin community and ensure every child has the opportunity to thrive.

Recommendations:

- **Prioritize investment in digital infrastructure** to bridge the digital divide in Bedouin villages.
- **Develop and implement culturally sensitive community outreach programs** to raise awareness about birth registration.
- **Simplify registration processes** and explore mobile registration units to effectively reach remote communities.
- **Provide training and support** to enhance digital literacy among Bedouin women and families.
- **Ensure digital platforms and materials are accessible**, culturally appropriate, and available in both Hebrew and Arabic.